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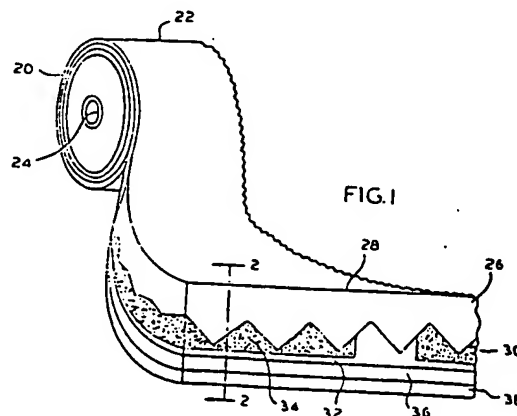
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(54) Retroreflective sheeting and methods for making same.

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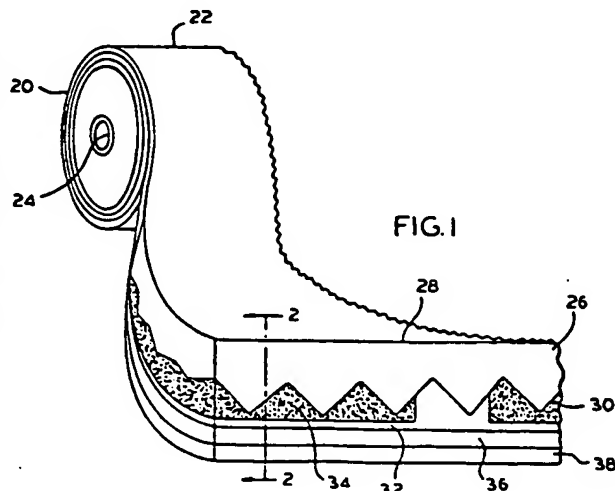
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RETROREFLECTIVE SHEETING AND METHODS FOR MAKING SAME
BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Retroreflective sheeting has particular use in making highway signs, street signs and the like, and is now employed extensively. The Federal government has recognized two primary types of retroreflective sheeting: glass bead and cube-corner. Such approved sheeting materials are found in a specification entitled "FP-79", published by the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration. Specification FP-79 presently has been adopted as a purchasing standard by many State Highway Departments, and it sets forth certain minimum specifications which must be met by retroreflective sheeting of the cube-corner type. Included among the specified characteristics are those for reflectivity, color, flexibility of material, and resistance to cracking and weathering.

Cube-corner type reflector elements generally provide a higher specific intensity at 0.2° observation angle and 0° entrance angle than do glass bead type reflector elements, but, to applicants' knowledge, no one successfully has furnished a sheeting material which will meet the requirements for the Class IIIB sheeting set forth in the aforementioned FP-79 specification in commercial quantities. It therefore is a primary object of the present invention to provide a unique sheeting product which will meet such specified criteria and which can be produced in accordance with the novel methods disclosed herein in an economical fashion and in commercial quantities.

Retroreflectivity is achieved by cube-corner type reflector elements primarily through the principle of total

internal reflection. It is well known that any surface contact made by another material with the faces of the cube-corner elements generally has a deleterious effect on the reflectiveness of the reflector element.

5 However, when all of the element faces are metallized, or mirrored, then, rather than relying upon total internal reflection, retroreflection is achieved by specular reflection from the mirrored faces. Generally, metallizing will provide a grayish or black coloration under certain
10 daylight conditions and may also generally reduce reflectivity under night-time conditions vis-a-vis unmetallized cube-corner type elements.

15 The present invention relates generally to methods and apparatus for producing retroreflective sheeting constructions and, more particularly, to methods and apparatus for producing a flexible laminate sheeting construction including an upper thermoplastic sheet, the reverse of which is provided with a repeating, retroreflecting pattern of fine or precise detail, a back coating to protect the
20 formed pattern, and an intermediate layer allowing bonding of the back coating to overlay the formed pattern on the thermoplastic sheet while preserving and enhancing the retroreflective properties of both the formed pattern and the laminated sheet. More precisely, the present invention
25 is applicable to the production of cube-corner type retroreflective sheeting laminates.

 Within the art of designing reflectors and retroreflective material, the terms "cube-corner" or "tri-hedral," or "tetrahedral" are recognized in the art as describing

structure or patterns consisting of three mutually perpendicular faces, not limited to any particular size or shape of the faces, or the orientation of the optical axis of the cube-corner element. Each of the cube-corner faces can assume a different size and shape relative to the others, depending upon the angular reflective response characteristics desired, and the cube forming techniques employed.

Examples of prior cube-corner type reflectors may be found in U.S. Patent No. 1,906,655, issued to Stimson, and U.S. Patent No. 4,073,568, issued to Heasley. Stimson shows a reflex light reflector including an obverse face and a reverse light-reflecting face consisting of a plurality of cube-corner type reflector elements with each such element having three mutually perpendicular surfaces adapted for total internal reflection of light impinging thereon from the obverse face. Heasley describes a cube-corner type reflector in the form of a rectangular parallelepiped.

It long has been desired to obtain the benefits of cube-corner reflective properties in the form of flexible sheeting. As noted above, one advantageous aspect of such sheeting is in the manufacture of highway and street signs, markers and the like, where graphics are printed, painted, silk-screened or otherwise applied to a highly reflective substrate mounted to a flat, stiff, supportive surface. Flexible retroreflective sheeting, when used as such a substrate, can be stored and shipped while wound onto rolls, and can readily be cut or otherwise formed into the desired shape and size required for a particular application. The

reflective nature of the sheeting allows such signs, markers, and the like to reflect light from a vehicle's headlights, permitting the item to be read by the driver, without requiring a permanent light source to illuminate the sign or marker.

5

Production of such retroreflective sheeting has been made practicable by apparatus and methods to form precise cube-corner patterns in greatly reduced sizes on flexible thermoplastic sheeting. Desirably, such sheeting may then be assembled in the form of self-adhesive laminates.

10

Others have recognized the desirability of producing retroreflective thermoplastic material in sheet form. United States Patents Nos. 2,310,790, 2,380,447, and 2,484,757, granted to Jungersen, describe and teach the shortcomings of previously-known reflectors manufactured from glass, and the advantages inherent in providing a reflective material in a less fragile and more flexible sheet form. While so suggesting, it is not known if Jungersen in fact ever commercialized any product disclosed in such patents.

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In U.S. Patents Nos. 4,244,683 and 4,332,847 issued to Rowland, the desirability of manufacturing cube-corner retroreflective sheeting in a continuous, non-stop process is presented, but the approach selected by Rowland is a "semi-continuous" process (Rowland '683, column 2, lines 18-34; Rowland '847, column 2, lines 26-38), presumably so-called because the process requires frequent repositioning of the molding plates.

25

In United States Patent No. 3,187,068, issued to DeVries, et al., continuous production of reflective sheeting is disclosed, utilizing encapsulated glass microspheres as the reflecting medium. DeVries, et al.

5 describes the application of a pressure-activated adhesive layer to such sheeting to enable attachment of sheeting segments to selected surfaces.

In United States Patent No. 3,649,352, issued to Courneya, a beaded sheeting construction is described, portions of which become reflective when heated, and which includes a pressure-activated adhesive layer allowing attachment of the sheeting construction to other articles.

10 Palmquist, et al., 2,407,680 teach the utilization of glass microspheres or beads included as the reflective elements in flexible sheet forms; Tung, et al., in United States Patent No. 4,367,920, also describes a laminated sheet construction using glass microspheres as the reflective elements.

20 A common problem in the construction of reflective laminate sheeting is to find means to bond the lamina firmly together in a way which preserves the required retroreflective qualities of the reflective elements selected for use. An example of prior efforts to solve this problem with respect to glass microspheres may be seen in United States Patent No. 3,190,178, issued to McKenzie, wherein a cover sheet or film is secured over exposed glass microspheres by use of die elements which force a portion of the material in which the glass microspheres are embedded into

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contact with the cover sheet. The die elements thus create a grid pattern on the resulting sheeting construction, with each grid forming a separate cell. Within each cell, an air space is maintained between the microspheres and the cover sheet, and incident light traverses the cover sheet and the air space to be retroreflected by the embedded microspheres.

Holmen, et al., U.S. Patent No. 3,924,929, teach a cube-corner type upper rigid sheet having upstanding walls, or septa, integrally formed as part of the cube pattern. The septa extend to form a regular geometric pattern of individual cells, with the septa extending at least as far from the upper sheet as the cube-corner elements. A particulate packing may be used to fill each of the cells, and a backing sheet is then attached to the rear of the upper sheet, with the septa serving as the attachment sites. Holmen, et al. use relatively large cube-corner elements fashioned as rigid sections bound to a flexible back, and has limited flexibility in use.

In McGrath, U.S. Patent No. 4,025,159, the cellular concept is described with respect to cube-corner type retro-reflective sheeting, through use of dies to force a carrier film into contact with the reverse side of the cube-corner sheeting. The carrier film must then be cured with radiation to bind it to the cube-corner sheeting and, as in McKenzie, the resulting cells include an airspace extending between the carrier film and the reverse side of the cube-corner sheet. The air cell structure apparently was intended to provide a hermetically sealed cell, avoiding

the need for metalizing the cube-corner elements, and providing an air/thermoplastic interface to enhance retroreflection.

5 None of the foregoing teach the assembly of molded or embossed cube-corner type retroreflective sheeting into self-adhesive laminates which protect and enhance the reflective properties of the sheeting without requiring the use of dies or of integrally-molded septa or walls included
10 as part of the cube pattern. Further, none of the foregoing permits the material to benefit from encapsulated sections of cube-corner elements while enhancing and meeting the requirements specified in the aforementioned DOT FP-79 Specification.

15

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

A thermoplastic sheet or web is provided on its reverse side with a retroreflective cube-corner type pattern. A thin layer of a liquid vehicle or solvent containing hydrophobic granular material (such as silica treated with
20 silanes) is deposited on the reverse side of the web, as by screen printing, in a pattern leaving selected sites devoid of granular material. The web is then dried to drive off the solvent and, thereafter, a water-based back coating is applied over the granular material pattern, with
25 portions of the back coating being in direct contact with the thermoplastic web at those sites on the web devoid of granular material. Thereafter, the back coating is dried or cured, and a layer of adhesive such as pressure-sensitive or heat-activated adhesive is applied

thereto. This procedure thus enables the assembly of patterned web material into laminates which include an activated adhesive layer while protecting the retroreflective properties of the precisely formed cube-corner pattern.

5

In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, a thin layer of a hydrophobic silica mixture is screened or sprayed onto an embossed reverse surface of a thermoplastic web in a diamond-like pattern, and is thereafter dried.

10

A water-based back coating mixture or formulation is next deposited over the silica layer to encapsulate the silica and to contact the thermoplastic sheet where no silica was deposited. The back coating then is heat dried and/or cured to form a continuous film. A pressure-sensitive or heat-activated adhesive then is applied to the cured backcoating layer, with the adhesive protected by a release sheet which is removed when the laminate is applied to an object.

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The completed laminate is then cut, trimmed, or otherwise shaped for application to supporting surfaces, such as street or highway signs, and graphics or other indicia may thereafter be painted, printed, silk-screened, or otherwise affixed to the uppermost surface of the laminate, thus producing a readily and easily constructed highly retroreflective finished product.

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These and further aspects of the present invention will become more apparent upon consideration of the accompanying drawings, wherein:

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is an enlarged perspective and somewhat schematic view of one preferred aspect of the retroreflective sheeting of the present invention as a completed construction;

FIG. 2 is a view along line 2-2 of Fig. 1;

FIG. 3 is a greatly enlarged plan view illustrating the formed surface of reflective sheeting comprising one aspect of the present invention;

FIG. 4 is a somewhat schematic and symbolic view of the processes and machinery utilized in a preferred aspect of the present invention;

FIG. 5 is a plan view of one form of screen pattern used to apply the silica layer of the present invention; and

FIG. 6 is an enlarged view, in partial detail, of an individual cell of the sheeting of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Referring now to Fig. 3, the numeral 10 indicates generally a segment of cube-corner type retroreflective thermoplastic web used in forming the laminate of the present invention. As seen in Fig. 3, the figures therein depict the rear surface of a portion of flexible retroreflective sheeting 12 fashioned from transparent

thermoplastic material in web form which has formed thereon, preferably by embossing, a retroreflective and repeating pattern of cube-corner reflector elements characterized by cube faces 14, 16 and 18. In a preferred aspect of such sheeting, sheet 12 is formed from an impact-modified acrylic material having UV inhibitors or absorbers added thereto, and which, prior to embossing, had parallel front and back surfaces and was initially on the order of about 0.006 inches thick.

5 *in an optically precise finely detailed pattern*
10 The cube-corner pattern formed *in* sheeting 12 is formed in a precise, finely-detailed pattern. For example, as seen in Fig. 2, the depth to which the cube-corner pattern is embossed onto sheet 12 may be of the order of 0.00338 inch, (dimension X). As shown at dimension Y in Fig. 3,
15 the cubes formed on sheet 12 may be spaced apart by a distance on the order of about 0.0072 inch, for the depth as shown at X as set forth above. While the cube pattern shown in Fig. 1 illustrates cubes formed with their optical axes normal to the face of sheet 12, it is to be understood
20 that other versions and patterns may also be utilized as forming the retroreflective web of the laminate of the present invention.

Referring now to Fig. 1, the numeral 20 indicates generally a roll of retroreflective laminate²² manufactured in accordance with preferred aspects of the present invention to be described hereinbelow. As herein shown, laminate 22 is rolled onto a core 24. A thermoplastic web 26 having a front or obverse surface 28 and a rear or reverse surface 30 upon which is embossed the cube-corner

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type retroreflective pattern is illustrated in Fig. 3. The thermoplastic web 26 may be on the order of about 6 mils in thickness (0.006 inch).

5 Bonded to the reverse surface 30 of the thermoplastic web 26 is back coating or film 32. In a preferred aspect of the present invention, a hydrophobic granular silica material 34 is interposed between the back coat film 32 and the reverse side 30 in a manner to be described hereinbelow.

10 In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention, a layer of adhesive 36 is bonded to a release sheet 38 in a presently well-known fashion, and is thereafter bonded to cured back coat film 32 in order to provide a finished laminate 22 which includes a
15 pressure-sensitive or heat-activated adhesive layer 36 applied to sheeting 12 in a manner which preserves the retroreflective qualities and properties of the cube-corner pattern embossed thereon. The release sheet 38 is used to protect adhesive layer 36 until it is desired to apply
20 laminate 22 to a given surface.

Fig. 4 shows, in schematic form, a preferred arrangement of equipment and sequence of operations to produce a retro-reflective sheeting laminate of the type shown in Fig. 3.

25 The application of adhesive directly to the reverse side of a cube-corner embossed thermoplastic web will cause an undesirable and unacceptable loss of retroreflective capability. This arises from the contact of the adhesive material with the obverse side of embossed thermoplastic web

26, i.e., the filling of the "valleys" formed by the embossed pattern and the subsequent interface formed between substances too close in refractive indices to produce adequate retroreflection, so the transparent film can no longer utilize the phenomenon of total internal reflection to efficiently effect retroreflection of light. To solve this problem, a substantial portion of the cube-corner pattern either must be hermetically sealed with an air space between the back wall and the cube-corner elements, or the cube-corner elements must be backed in a way which would preserve the retroreflective properties of the formed web while providing sites for firm attachment of an adhesive layer (or other adhesive material). Without such protection, and without such attaching sites, the use of, and effectiveness of a retroreflective embossed web is seriously compromised and curtailed.

Unexpectedly, use of hydrophobic granular materials has been found to afford such protection. Among such materials are xylenated glass particles, powdered silicone rubber, and silane-treated silica.

As part of the present invention, it has been found that a hydrophobic silica mixture consisting principally of amorphous silica treated with silanes, when used to fill the valleys formed by the embossed pattern, preserves the retroreflective properties of the formed pattern for most practical purposes. Again, it is not known precisely why this effect obtains: it has been theorized that the point contact of granules with the reverse face of the embossed thermoplastic web acts to preserve the retroreflective

properties of the pattern, perhaps by preserving a sufficient air interface with the reverse side of the cube-corner pattern. However, the present invention obtains excellent results even where the silica particles used are significantly smaller than, for example, the particles discussed in prior art patents such as Holmen, et al., U.S. Patent No. 3,924,929.

Use of such silica offers advantages such as low price, availability, and ease and precision of formulation. It further provides unique color and reflective characteristics to the film which improves the appearance of the film even relative to the glass bead types heretofore commonly used.

As discussed hereinabove with respect to the Holmen, et al. reference, others have attempted to solve the problem of loss of reflectivity by providing upstanding walls or septa as part of the rigid molded front face pattern, with the septa forming individual pockets for the application of granular compounds having particle sizes far in excess of the silica particles used in the present invention. The disadvantages to such an approach, particularly with respect to the cube-corner type embossed pattern utilized in the present invention are manifest. Use of rigid septa limits the size and shape of the cell. A separate mold must be formed for each type of retroreflective sheeting requiring a cell size other than that formed in the original mold. What is meant by the term "cell size" is the area bounded by or closed off by the walls to form a single pocket for the granular backing material.

Formation of such septa in a relatively rigid mold pattern manufactured to as fine and precise a degree of detail as that shown in the present invention also may cause problems with respect to stripping the formed thermoplastic web from the forming tool. This may particularly be a problem where the septa or walls extend inwardly into the mold to a distance greater than the depth of the cube-corner pattern.

A preferred embodiment of the present invention includes the mixing of a hydrophobic silica mixture using hydrophobic silica, organic solvents, and thickeners, and the application of this mixture, while in a liquid form, to the reverse side of the formed thermoplastic web in a desired pattern. One advantage of the present process and product is that the pattern can conveniently be changed to effect changes in reflective capability of the film, without changing the tools used in forming the embossed web. Thereafter, the partially coated or imprinted thermoplastic web is passed through a drying oven which drives off the solvents used to form the mixture, thereby drying the pattern on the thermoplastic sheet. The pattern in which the silica is applied to the thermoplastic web leaves selected portions or sites on the thermoplastic web devoid of silica.

Referring now to Fig. 5, the numeral 40 indicates generally such a selected pattern. Each runner or path 42 represents an area on the reverse surface of thermoplastic web 26 where no silica has been deposited. Each square or

diamond-shaped area 44 represents an area on the surface of thermoplastic web 26 onto which the silica mixture has been deposited.

5 As seen in Fig. 6, the actual percentage of area covered by the silica mixture is determined by the thickness or width of each runner or path 42, and the pattern selected for deposition of the silica, with the cell 44 having an area bounded by the runners, and fully available for the reception and retroreflection of incident light by the embossed retroreflective patterns shown partially at 10 46.

Referring now to Fig. 4, it may be seen that thermoplastic web 26 may be drawn directly from an associated forming machine (not herein specifically shown) in a continuous process, or may be drawn from a separate supply 15 reel onto which the embossed web 26 has been wound (not herein specifically shown). If desired, web 26 may be supported by a backing sheet, not herein specifically shown, coextensive with obverse face 28, leaving reverse surface 20 30 exposed.

It should be noted that reference to web 26 also includes reference to a laminate formed by web 26 and a backing sheet such as described hereinabove.

(not herein specifically shown)
25 Web 26 is drawn by, for example, powered rollers, to silica mixture application station 48. As herein diagrammatically shown, a preferred means and method of applying the silica mixture to web 26 may be accomplished through use of a screen-printing roller 50 which has

mounted about the outer periphery thereof, a metal screen formed to provide the shape or pattern to which it is desired to apply the silica mixture. The mixture is forced under pressure from the interior of screen-printing drum onto the reverse side 30 of the thermoplastic web 26. As herein shown, the web 26 is directed by idler roller 52 to pass between the screen-printing drum 50 and a backing drum 54.

A preferred form of the apparatus utilized to apply the silica mixture at application station 48 consists of a drum printer manufactured by Stork Brabant BV of Boxmeern, Holland, of the type having a drum with electro-formed mesh screens over which a photo-resist pattern (such as a silk screen) may be mounted, with a screen pattern providing a diamond cell size in the range of from about 0.096 inch to 0.300 inch, and a runner or cell wall thickness of from about 0.010 inch to about 0.050 inch. Variations in the shape of the cells, pattern repeat of the cells, and thickness of the runners may be accomplished by changing the printing screen used on screen-printing drum 50. Also, the constant width of the web may be of various sizes, and the printing screens used will be of a compatible width.

In its preferred form, the silica mixture is made from a hydrophobic silica such as that manufactured by the Pigments Division of Degussa, of Frankfurt, West Germany, under the trade designation Sipernat D10. A preferred composition of the mixture includes hydrophobic silica in a mixture containing approximately 98 percent silane-treated silicon dioxide (SiO_2); 0.8 percent sodium

oxide (Na_2O), and 0.8 percent of sulfur trioxide (SO_3);
a non-polar aliphatic hydrocarbon solvent carrier; a polar
solvent; and, where desired or required, a thickening
agent. One aliphatic non-polar hydrocarbon solvent success-
fully used is mineral spirits, and a workable mixture has
been created through use of an organic alcohol, preferably
butanol, as the non-polar solvent material. A clay-based
thixotropic thickener also may be used in varying amounts
to produce a well-defined screen-printed pattern of the
silica slurry on the embossed thermoplastic web.

The particular combination of solvents and thickeners
is important to satisfactory deposition and retention of
the silica in a precise and accurate pattern. Screen
printing of particulate material commonly requires use of
resins or other binders to hold the deposited particles in
place. A resin or binder cannot however be used in this
instance because of the adverse reactive effect on the thermo-
plastic web and reflectivity.

Another important consideration is the rheology, or
flow characteristics of the silica slurry as it is forced
through the printing screen. The slurry must "relax," or
thin as it is forced through the screen apertures, and
thereafter regain sufficient viscosity to retain a
well-defined pattern with good leveling qualities and
appearance characteristics. Yet, another consideration is
use of a solvent vehicle which obtains the aforementioned
qualities without attacking or degrading the thermoplastic
web upon which the retroreflective pattern it formed.

Use of polar solvents, such as butanol, enables the
slurry to maintain an increased concentration of solids (silica).

Such solvents, however, react with the thermoplastic material used to form the web. Non-polar solvents, such as mineral spirits, preserve the embossed web, yet do not act to provide a satisfactory silica pattern. Therefore a blend of polar and non-polar solvents has been found to be useful in carrying enough solids without degrading reflectivity and degrading the web.

Preferably, the hydrophobic silica is present in proportions ranging from about 15 percent to about 35 percent by weight, the non-polar solvent carrier is present in amounts ranging from about 40 percent to about 70 percent, the polar solvent is present in amounts ranging from about 10 percent to about 30 percent, and the thickening agent may be present in amounts from about 2 percent to about 8 percent. One preferred formulation of the silica mixture includes 20 percent by weight Sipernat D10 hydrophobic silica, 56 percent mineral spirits, 20 percent butanol, and 4 percent thickener. It has been found that such proportions preserve the web while providing a useful silica pattern.

After application of the silica mixture, web 26 is passed through a heating oven 56 where the resulting silica pattern is heated to drive off the organic solvents without heating web 26 to the point where heat distortion of the cube-corner elements of the laminate will occur.

After drying, the silica is mechanically held to the cube-corner elements on the reverse face 30 of web 26 by, it is believed, electrostatic forces and physical inter-engagement of the silica particles themselves.

Thus, as web 26 exits mixture application station 48, it has taken on the form of a first modified laminate 58, i.e., a web 26 having cube-corner elements with a precisely formed pattern of silica mixture screened thereon over a portion of the elements, with an uncovered portion of the cube-corner elements still exposed. As modified laminate 58 exits drying oven 56, it takes on a second modified laminate construction 60 wherein the solvents present in the silica mixture have been driven off and the silica itself has remained cured or dried into its screened-on pattern.

The second modified laminate 60 then enters a back coating application station 62. The application of a water-based back coating accomplishes several results. First, those areas onto which no silica has been screened or deposited will allow direct contact between the back coating and the reverse side 30 of the embossed or otherwise formed thermoplastic web, thus "wetting" web 26 with the liquid backcoating mixture. Second, a layer of back coating material will overlay the silica pattern formed on thermoplastic web 26 and, when applied effectively, will not disturb or disrupt the printed or screened-on silica pattern. Third, the back coating may then be dried or cured to provide a firm attachment to thermoplastic web 26 to provide a flat, smooth and integral surface upon which further layers, such as a layer of pressure-sensitive or heat-activated adhesive may be effectively and conveniently applied, and to protectively cover or encapsulate the silica pattern. A surprising and unexpected result is that the silica prevents permeation by the liquid back coating

to the cube-corner pattern. As described above, such permeation would adversely affect the reflectivity of the final assembled laminate.

5 Application of the back coating mixture to the second modified laminate 60 may be accomplished in a number of ways, such as by spraying, roller application, squeegeeing, or the like. The manner in which the back coat is applied will be determined by, inter alia, the precise formulation of the back coat and the pressure, or force, which can be
10 withstood by the silica pattern after it has been dried.

For purposes of illustration, a back coating application station 62 may be characterized as having a supply header or tank 64 communicating with an application means 66 which may be a nozzle or series of nozzles, or the like.
15 An implement such as a doctor blade 68 may be used to more uniformly spread the back coating after it has been applied without damaging the silica pattern. A platen 70 provides support for the second modified laminate 60 during application of the back coat.

20 After application, the third modified laminate 72 enters drying oven 74 wherein the back coat material is heat-cured, resulting in back coating layer 32 as shown in Fig. 1.

25 Successful use of a back coating requires that the back coating formulation meet several particularly important working parameters. One is that the back coating have flow characteristics such that the relatively narrow and shallow runners formed by the silica pattern will be filled, while

not disturbing the dried silica pattern itself. This means that the viscosity of the back coating must be carefully controlled to assure that the back coating can be applied without disturbing the silicone pattern. Another characteristic is that the back coating cannot penetrate or
5 interact with the applied silica to reach the interface between the silica and the cube-corner pattern. Yet another requirement is that the back coating, when dried, have the required flexibility and toughness to withstand use in a
10 laminate. Ideally, the back coating should also be of a color which enhances daytime visibility of articles made with such laminates.

Several preferred back coatings have been utilized. Each may be characterized generally as including a
15 water-borne or water-based polymeric mixture or system, a whitening agent, a defoamer, a thickener for use in adjusting the final viscosity, and a pH-adjusting component.

A first preferred formulation of a back coating is presented herewith as Example 1:

20 Example 1:

1. DP-101, a water-borne polymeric system consisting of about 34% acrylic/urethane copolymer and 66% water 69.7% to 79.7%
- 25 2. UCD-1060Q, a pre-dispersed whitening agent (titanium dioxide) containing about 72% solids 21.5% to 23.5%

3. Balab 3017A, a defoamer 0.4% to 0.6%
4. CP-15 (50 percent in water)
acrylic/based thickener to
adjust viscosity 1.5% to 2.5%
5. Ammonia (28 percent aqueous
solution) to adjust pH
to 9.0 to 10.0 None to 0.3%

10 The foregoing mixture is formed by adding the defoamer
to the water-borne acrylic/urethane copolymer system with
gentle stirring. Thereafter, the whitening agent and the
ammonia, if necessary, are added as gentle stirring is
continued. The thickener is thereafter added with increasing
blade speed and the entire mixture is stirred for about 30
minutes at moderate speed. A preferred mixture for such
15 an operation is manufactured by Meyers Engineering of Bell,
California under the trade or model designation "550."

20 DP-101 is a trade designation of Polyvinyl Chemical
Industries, Inc. of Wilmington, Massachusetts. While the
precise formulation is not known, Polyvinyl Chemical
Industries has assigned the trade designation DP-101 only
to the particular urethane/acrylic copolymer resin utilized
in the foregoing back coat formulation. UCD-1060Q is a
trade designation of the Universal Color Dispersion Company
of Lansing, Illinois used to identify a dispersion product
25 for water-based systems. Balab 3017-A is also identified
by the trade designation "bubble breaker" and is a product
of the Organics Division of Witco Chemical Corporation of

New York, N.Y. CP-15 is a trade designation of the Rohm and Haas Company and is an acrylic-based thickening agent.

A second formulation for the back coating material is herewith presented as example 2:

5 Example 2:

	1.	Emulsion E-1829, a water-borne polymeric acrylic emulsion	42.1% to 62.1%
	2.	Water	2.2% to 12.2%
10	3.	Ethylene glycol, an anti-skinning flow improvement agent	1.5% to 2.5%
	4.	UCD 1060Q, a pre-dispersed whitening agent (titanium dioxide)	26.2% to 36.2%
15	5.	Syloid 169, silicone dioxide flatting agent to prevent blocking	3.2% to 5.2%
	6.	Dimethylamino ethanol pH-adjusting solvent	0.3% to 0.5%
	7.	Balab 3017A defoamer	0.6% to 1.0%
20	8.	Texanol solvent, a coalescent solvent for improved film formation	1.4% to 1.6%

9. CP-15 (50 percent in water)
acrylic-based thickener to adjust
viscosity

None to 1.6%

5 The foregoing back coating is prepared by adding the
defoamer to the water-borne system with gentle mixing, then
adding the water, the anti-skinning agent, the
pre-dispersed whitening agent and the amine while continuing
gentle mixing. Thereafter, the coalescent solvent is
added. Blade speed is then increased and the thickener is
10 added to adjust the viscosity to the desired level and the
resulting mixture is then stirred at moderate speed for 30
minutes.

Emulsion E-1829 is a trade designation of the Rohm and
Haas Company of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for an acrylic
15 emulsion vehicle. Syloid is a trade designation of the
Davidson Chemical Company, a division of W.R. Grace, of
Baltimore, Maryland for a silicon dioxide flatting agent.
Texanol is a trade designation of the Eastman Chemical
Products Company of Kingsport, Tennessee used to identify
20 a coalescing agent.

Referring now to Fig. 2, a partial sectional view of
a schematic portion of embossed thermoplastic web 26 after
application of both silica 34 and back coating 32 is shown.
As therein seen, reverse side 30 of thermoplastic web
25 includes a series of valleys, indicated generally at 76.
The valleys 76 schematically represent the cube-corner
elements found in web 26 when the cube-corner pattern shown
in Fig. 1 is embossed onto thermoplastic web 26. When the

silica layer 34 is applied, the valleys between adjacent cube-corner elements 76 are filled (except where the screen pattern leaves Web 26 exposed) and, in a preferred embodiment of the invention, enough silica 34 is applied to extend a distance of about 0.0001 to about 0.003 inch above the embossed surface of thermoplastic web 26, as characterized by dimension A of Fig. 2. In like fashion, the back coat layer 32 is applied to a thickness B of about 0.002 to about 0.004 inch above the silica layer 34. Where runners or paths 42 are formed, each such runner consists of the back coat material which extends downward to wet the floor of each valley 76 to a total depth C, as shown in Fig. 2 which, preferably, is about 0.006 inch. In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, each such runner is 0.001 inch deep and, as characterized by dimension in Figs. 2 and 6, may be on the order of 0.015 inch wide.

In the embodiment herein illustrated, each discrete element of the applied silica pattern is square in shape with the length of each side of the square characterized by dimension in Fig. 2. As hereinabove described, the percentage of surface area available for retroreflection may be adjusted by adjusting the dimensions D and E as shown in Figs. 2 and 6. Where, for example, dimension D is 0.015 inch and dimension E is 0.200 inch, the effective surface available for retroreflection is 84 percent. Where dimension D is 0.027 inch and dimension E is 0.138 inch, approximately 70 percent of the surface of the resulting sheet preserves retroreflective characteristics. With a dimension D of 0.029 inch and a dimension E of 0.096 inch,

approximately 55 percent of the total surface of the resulting sheet retains retroreflective properties.

Thus, the degree to which the resulting laminar sheet returns incident light towards its source may be adjusted independent of the actual cube-corner type pattern formed on thermoplastic web 26, in a manner which is much more convenient and efficacious than changing the mold dimensions or characteristics used to produce the embossed cube-corner pattern.

Referring again to Fig. 4, after fourth modified laminate 84 exits drying oven 74, a pressure-sensitive or heat-activated adhesive layer 36 may then be applied by taking the resulting laminate 84 and drawing it past a station where a backing or release sheet 38, pre-coated with adhesive 36, may be layered directly onto back coating 38, resulting in a completed laminate 22 as shown in Fig. 1. Finally, if one is used, the carrier sheet is stripped away, exposing obverse face 28 as the light-receiving surface of the finished laminate 22.

It should be noted that the foregoing examples and preferred embodiments have been presented with respect to a cube-corner embossed pattern having a depth characterized by dimension X in Fig. 2 of 0.004 inch. It is contemplated that patterns of varying depth and varying dimensions may be utilized, and that the dimensions herein discussed for the depth of silica applied, and the width and depth of the runners thereby formed, may be varied without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention as herein discussed.

The finished sheet will have the physical characteristics enabling it to meet specification FP-79 for reflective sheeting, and its reflective properties can easily be varied by utilizing a different screen pattern. Moreover, the whiteness achieved by the existing laminate back coating substantially enhances the daylight esthetics of the finished material. The heating of the laminate during the drying and curing of the silica, back coating or adhesive, also may have an effect on the final reflective performance of the laminate, dependent upon the characteristics of the initial tool and the material chosen for the film.

It may also be noted that while the silica pattern herein presented is a series of squares turned to present a diamond-like pattern, other cell sizes and shapes are also possible, wherever they appear efficacious for purposes of performance or appearance, and are within the spirit and scope of the invention as herein discussed and claimed.

While the foregoing has presented various specific preferred embodiments, it is to be understood that these embodiments have been presented by way of example only. It is expected that others will perceive differences which, while varying from the foregoing, do not depart from the spirit and scope of the invention as herein claimed and described.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A relatively flexible retroreflective laminate sheet construction including a thermoplastic web with a light-receiving and transmitting first side and a second side coextensive with said first side, and a retroreflective pattern formed on said second side, said construction
5 comprising:

a layer of granular material deposited on said second side to cover selected portions of said formed retroreflective pattern with remaining portions of said formed pattern devoid of said granular material; and
10

a layer of back coating material deposited on said second side to overlay said granular material, said back coating material contacting said remaining portions of said formed pattern and fixedly secured thereto, thereby encapsulating said granular material between said second
15 side and said back coating layer.

2. The construction of Claim 1, wherein said granular material is deposited in a regular and repeating pattern.

3. The construction of Claim 1, wherein said granular material is deposited in a discrete, regularly-spaced pattern of elements:

5 each said element being surrounded by contiguous of
said remaining portions of said formed pattern devoid of
said granular material.

4. The construction of Claim 1 wherein said granular
material is hydrophobic.

5. The construction of Claim 4, wherein said granular
material is hydrophobic silica.

6. The construction of Claim 1, wherein said granular
material has a particle size of about 18 nanometers.

7. The construction of Claim 1, wherein said layer
of granular material consists initially of a slurry
consisting of a hydrophobic granular material, a polar
solvent, and a non-polar solvent, said polar solvent and
5 said non-polar solvent present in relative proportions
sufficient to allow deposition of said hydrophobic granular
material in a well-defined pattern on said thermoplastic
web.

8. The construction of Claim 7, wherein said granular material is hydrophobic silica.

9. The construction of Claim 7, wherein said polar solvent is an aliphatic alcohol.

10. The construction of Claim 7, wherein said polar solvent is butanal.

11. The construction of Claim 7, wherein said non-polar solvent is mineral spirits.

12. The construction of Claim 9 or 10, wherein said polar solvent is present in an amount from about 10% to about 30% of said slurry, and said non-polar solvent is present in an amount from about 40% to about 70% of said slurry.

13. The construction of Claim 9 or 10, wherein said polar solvent is present in an amount of about 15% of said slurry.

14. The construction of Claim 7, wherein said slurry consists of from about 15% to about 35% of said hydrophobic granular material, from about 10% to about 30% of said polar solvent, and from about 40% to about 70% of said non-polar solvent.

5

15. The construction of Claim 7, wherein said slurry includes a thixotropic thickener.

16. The construction of Claim 1, wherein said back coating consists principally of a polymeric, water-based system.

17. The construction of Claim 16, wherein said back coating includes a major proportion of an acrylic/urethane copolymer.

18. The construction of Claim 16, wherein said back coating includes a major proportion of a polymeric acrylic water-borne system.

19. The construction of Claim 16, wherein said back coating consists initially of the following constituents:

(a) a water-borne emulsion of an acrylic/urethane copolymer in a proportion from about 69 percent to about 80 percent;

(b) a whitening agent in a proportion from about 21 percent to about 24 percent;

(c) a defoamer in a proportion from about 0.4 percent to about 0.6 percent;

(d) an acrylic-based thickening agent in a proportion from about 1.5 percent to 2.5 percent; and

(e) a pH-adjusting agent in a proportion up to about 0.3 percent.

20. The construction of Claim 16, wherein said back coating initially consists of the following constituents:

(a) a water-borne polymeric acrylic system in a proportion from about 42 percent to about 62 percent;

5 (b) a water in a proportion from about 2 percent to about 12 percent;

(c) an anti-skinning agent in a proportion from about 1.5 percent to about 2.5 percent;

10 (d) a whitening agent in a proportion from about 5 percent to about 36 percent;

(e) a flatting agent in a proportion from about 3 percent to about 5 percent;

(f) a pH-adjusting agent in a proportion from about 0.3 percent to about 0.5 percent;

15 (g) a defoamer in a proportion from about 0.6 percent to about 1.0 percent;

(h) a coalescent solvent in a proportion from about 1.0 percent to 1.6 percent; and

20 (i) a thickener in a proportion from up to 3.6 percent.

21. The construction set forth in Claim 1, 6, 19 or 20, in which the retroreflective pattern consists of an array of cube-corner type reflecting elements.

22. The construction set forth in Claim 21, in which said array of cube-corner elements repeats itself in regular intervals.

23. A retroreflective laminate sheet construction comprising:

5 a thermoplastic web having a light-receiving and transmitting first side and second side coextensive with said first side;

said second side having a repeating retroreflective pattern of precise detail formed thereon;

10 a layer of granular material disposed on said second side to cover selected portions of said formed pattern and leave the remaining portions of said formed pattern devoid of said granular material;

a layer of back coating material deposited on said second side to overlay said granular material;

15 said back coating material contacting said remaining portions of said formed pattern;

said back coating material being in secure attachment to said second side at said remaining portions, thereby encapsulating said granular material between said second side and said back coating material;

20 a layer of adhesive applied to and coextensive with said back coating material; and

 a release sheet releasably secured to said adhesive layer.

24. The construction of Claim 23, wherein said granular material is deposited on said second side in a regular and repeating pattern:

5 said regular and repeating pattern including discrete, regularly-spaced pattern elements of selected geometric shape; and

 each said pattern element surrounded by contiguous portions of said pattern devoid of said granular material.

25. The construction of Claim 23, wherein said back coating material is applied to overlay said granular material and said remaining portions of said formed pattern.

26. The construction of Claim 23, wherein said granular material is deposited in a regular and repeating array.

27. The construction of Claim 26, wherein said array comprise an array of square pattern elements:

said pattern elements defining therebetween a series of paths devoid of said granular material.

28. The construction of Claim 23, wherein said granular material has a particle size of about 18 nanometers.

29. The construction of Claim 23, wherein said granular material is hydrophobic silica.

30. The construction of Claim 23, wherein said back coating includes a major proportion of a water-borne acrylic-urethane copolymer.

31. The construction of Claim 23, wherein said back coating includes a major proportion of a polymeric acrylic water-borne system.

32. The construction of Claim 23, wherein said back coating initially includes a hydrophobic granular material, a polar solvent, and a non-polar solvent.

33. The construction of Claim 32, wherein said hydrophobic granular material is hydrophobic silica.

34. The construction of Claim 32, wherein said polar solvent is an aliphatic alcohol.

35. The construction of Claim 32, wherein said polar solvent is butanal.

36. The construction of Claim 32, wherein said non-polar solvent is mineral spirits.

37. A method for producing retroreflective laminate sheet constructions, said method comprising the steps of:

5 (a) applying to a web of thermoplastic material having a retroreflective pattern, on one side, a layer of granular material deposited in a regular and repeating array on said retroreflective pattern;

(b) forming, as part of said array a plurality of paths devoid of said granular material;

10 (c) applying a layer of back coating material to overlay said granular material and to fill said paths; and

(d) curing said back coating material to encapsulate said granular material between said embossed side and said cured back coating material.

38. A relatively flexible retroreflective laminate sheet construction including a retroreflective web with a light-receiving and transmitting first side and a second side co-extensive with said first side, and a retroreflective pattern formed on said second side, said construction comprising:

5

a layer of granular material deposited on said second side to cover selected portions of said formed pattern with remaining portions of said formed pattern forming paths devoid of said granular material;

10

15 a layer of back coating material deposited on said second side to overlay said granular material, said back coating material contacting said remaining portions of said formed pattern and being fixedly secured thereto, thereby encapsulating said granular material between said second side and said back coating layer; and

means for adjusting the amount of incident light reflected from said first side of said retroreflective web, without changing said formed pattern.

39. The construction of Claim 38 wherein said reflection adjusting means includes sizing and shaping said paths to cover a selected portion of the surface area of said second web side.

40. The construction of Claim 39, wherein said granular material is deposited in a discrete, regularly-spaced array of elements:

5 each said element being surrounded by contiguous of said paths.

41. The construction of Claim 40 wherein said array elements are square.

42. The construction of Claim 40 wherein said paths are rectangular.

43. The construction of Claim 40 wherein each said element is a square having sides of 0.200 inch and each said path is 0.015 inch wide.

44. The construction of Claim 40 wherein each said element is a square having sides of 0.138 inch wide and each said path is 0.127 inch wide.

45. The construction of Claim 40 wherein each said element is a square having sides of 0.096 inch and each said path is 0.029 inch wide.

46. A water-based back coating for application and attachment to a thermoplastic web, said back coating comprising:

5 (a) a water-borne emulsion of an acrylic/urethane copolymer in a proportion from about 69 percent to about 80 percent;

(b) a whitening agent in a proportion from about 21 percent to about 24 percent;

10 (c) a defoamer in a proportion from about 0.4 percent to about 0.6 percent;

(d) an acrylic-based thickening agent in a proportion from about 1.5 percent to 2.5 percent; and

(e) a pH-adjusting agent in a proportion up to about 0.3 percent.

47. A water-based back coating for application and attachment to a supporting thermoplastic web, said back coating comprising:

5 (a) a water-borne polymeric acrylic system in a proportion from about 42 percent to about 62 percent;

(b) a water in a proportion from about 2 percent to about 12 percent;

(c) an anti-skinning agent in a proportion from about 1.5 percent to about 2.5 percent;

- 10 (d) a whitening agent in a proportion from about 5 percent to about 36 percent;
- (e) a flatting agent in a proportion from about 3 percent to about 5 percent;
- 15 (f) a pH-adjusting agent in a proportion from about 0.3 percent to about 0.5 percent;
- (g) a defoamer in a proportion from about 0.6 percent to about 1.0 percent;
- (h) a coalescent solvent in a proportion from about 1.0 percent to 1.6 percent; and
- 20 (i) a thickener in a proportion from up to 3.0 percent.

48. A slurry of hydrophobic granular material for application to an embossed thermoplastic web, said slurry including:

- solids consisting of hydrophobic silica;
- 5 a polar solvent; and
- a non-polar solvent.

49. The construction of Claim 48, wherein said polar solvent is present in an amount from about 15% to about 30% of said slurry and said non-polar solvent is present in an amount from about 40% to about 70%.

50. The construction of Claim 48, wherein said polar solvent is an aliphatic alcohol.

51. The construction of Claim 48, wherein said polar solvent is butanol.

52. The construction of Claim 48, wherein said non-polar solvent is mineral spirits.

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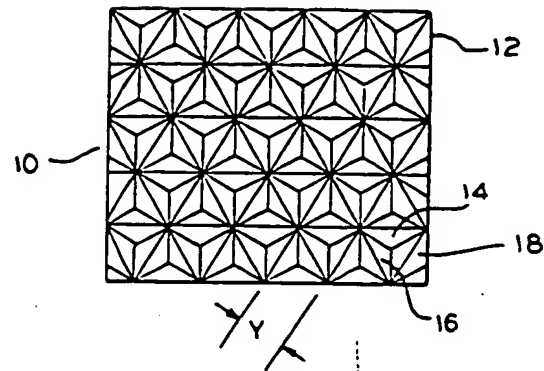


FIG. 3

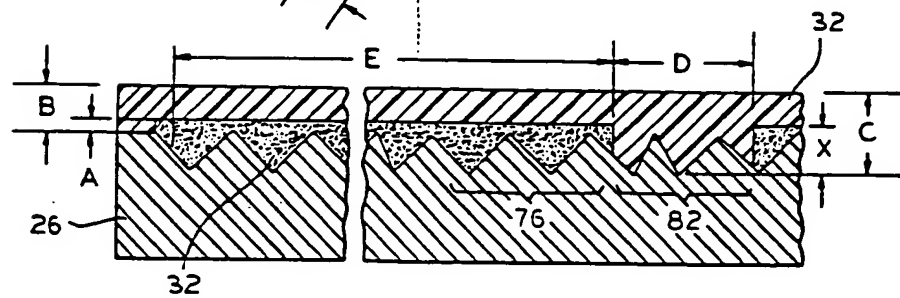


FIG. 2

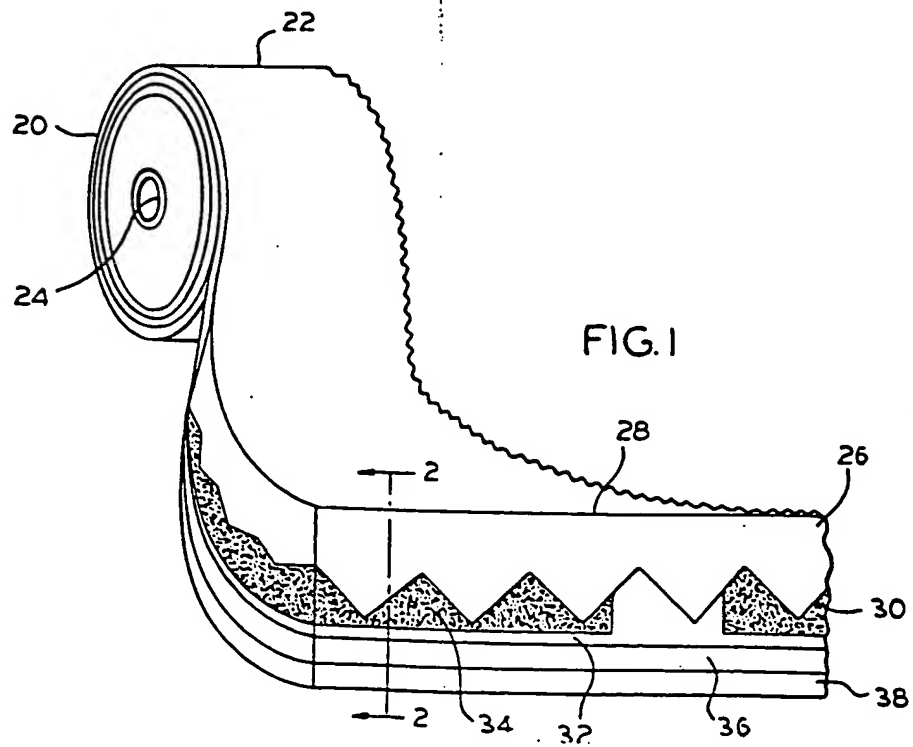
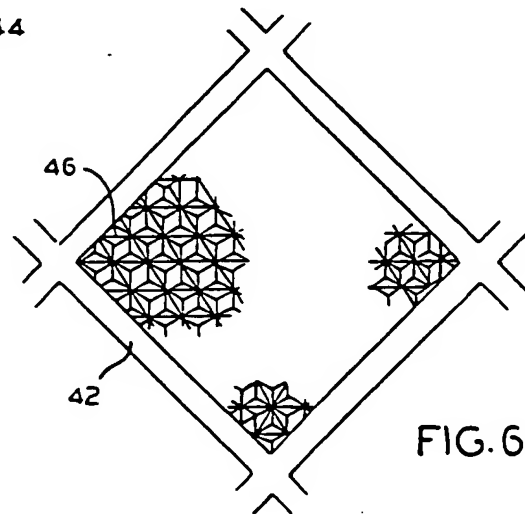
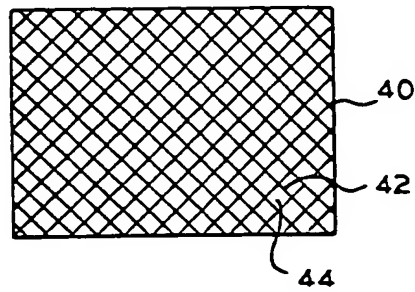
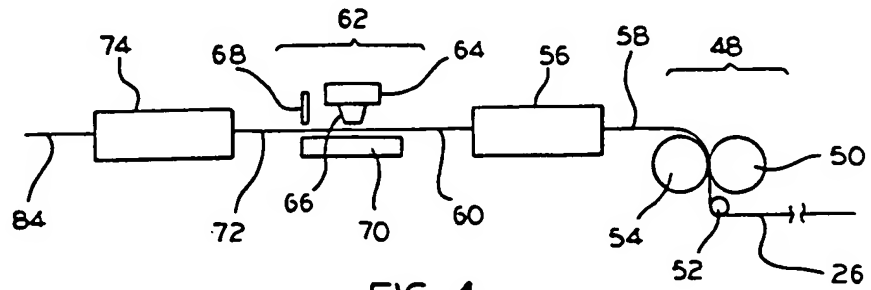


FIG. 1

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European Patent
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EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

01 42250

Application number

EP 84 30 6392

DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT			
Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int. Cl. 4)
X,D	US-A-4 025 159 (J.M. GRATH) * Column 3, lines 23-29; column 3, lines 66; column 6, line 11; column 11, lines 48-68 *	1-4,21 ,22,41	G 02 B 5/124 B 05 D 5/06 B 05 D 7/26 B 44 F 1/04 B 44 F 1/02
A	---	17,42	
X,D	US-A-3 924 929 (R.E.HOLMEN) * Column 4, line 25 - column 5, line 3 *	1-4,21 -22	
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A	US-A-2 481 757 (T.G. JUNGENSEN) * Claim 1 *	1	

The present search report has been drawn up for all claims			
Place of search THE HAGUE		Date of completion of the search 29-08-1986	Examiner FRIDEN N.
CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS		T : theory or principle underlying the invention E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date D : document cited in the application L : document cited for other reasons & : member of the same patent family, corresponding document	
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